

AFRL recognizes imagination of tomorrow's S&Es

by Timothy Anderl, AFRL Headquarters

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, OHIO — Amidst a room filled with the ideas and products that will help to develop the technologies of tomorrow gather 300 inquisitive minds. Colonel James Heald, Vice Commander of the Air Force Research Laboratory, steps to the front of this hushed pack to offer a few words of introduction to, who he realizes are, the scientific piers of the future Air Force.

"The wellspring of our future endeavors is sitting in this room today," Heald said. "You are the inventors and problem-solvers, with a fervor for science and technology that the Air Force is unable to ignore."

Though one may guess that Heald was addressing a group of specialized, degree-holding scientists at a symposium or some other technical conference, Heald's words were meant for a group of junior high and high school students competing in one of many regional science fairs that AFRL sponsors each year.

The Air Force has been participating in regional fairs for six years and in international fairs since 1965. It supports 350 regional fairs in the United States and Puerto Rico annually and presents more than 2,400 awards.

At the regional level, AFRL presents first, second and third place awards to the top three entries in the junior and senior divisions. These fairs feature 1.5 million students competing at individual school and local levels for a chance to advance to the International Science and Engineering Fair held every May.

Air Force judges typically encourage projects with Air Force applicability that feature science, math and engineering.

According to Susan Sobieski, Air Force Science Fair program manager, the Air Force has several goals for the Science Fair Program. Stirring scientific interest in youth, parents, schools and communities is the primary reason the Air Force encourages representatives who are applying their research and knowledge to attend these fairs. Equally as important is the opportunity to recognize and encourage students who are already conducting research in science, math and engineering, and to acquaint students with Air Force career possibilities in the science and engineering fields, she said.

"We know that the way to strengthen the nation's technology future is through the ideas and imaginations of its young people," Sobieski said.



AND THE RESULTS ARE... — A participant from the International Science Fair describes her research to Tim Sharp, a volunteer judge from Air Force Research Laboratory. Sharp said the program was a good opportunity to interact with future scientists. "The total enthusiasm of these young scientists is infectious, and their creativity is amazing," Sharp said.

"The Air Force today is and has been, based on technological superiority; having the best equipment, weapon systems and minds driving our organization," Heald said. "We never ceased to be amazed at the foresight, intuition and dedication each of these young people possess."

According to AFRL's commander Maj. Gen. Richard

Paul the Air Force has a 2 billion dollar a year budget, 75 percent of which is spent on partnerships with academia and industry. Because of the Air Force's widespread interactions with these non-government agencies, Paul said it is important to build a relationship and offer encouragement early.

"(The Science Fair Program) is an indirect benefit perhaps, but it's a benefit to the nation and the engineering and science core," said Paul. "We are influencing students to move towards a science career path early in the hopes that tomorrow's technology will benefit from their expertise."

Potential judges can find out additional information about Air Force-supported science fairs on the Internet beginning

in January. The Laboratory publishes a list of regional fairs on the AFRL web site. Volunteers can check the list for fairs in their area and notify their appropriate point of contact, expressing interest in the program.

For the annual International Science Fair, judges need an advanced degree in a scientific field, such as physics, mathematics, chemistry or biology. Judges discuss the merits of particular projects with other judges who have some expertise in the area.

For more information on the Air Force Science Fair Program, contact Sobieski at Susan.Sobieski@afrl.af.mil, or call her at (937) 656-9875. @